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SUBJECT: UNITED FRONT MAKES ABDULLAH ENDORSEMENT OFFICIAL

REF: KABUL 535

¶1. (SBU) The United Front opposition coalition announced on April 15 it had nominated former Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah as its candidate for president in this summer's election. Abdullah offers an impressive political and international resume, but we continue to assess that Karzai runs ahead of Abdullah either in a multi-candidate field or in a head-to-head race.

¶2. (SBU) The nomination comes after months of internal UF debate over whether a UF candidate could unite the coalition's various factions and attract enough outside support from other parties to put its candidate over the 50 percent requirement for a first- or second-round victory. Abdullah emerged as the front runner earlier this year after several UF insiders publicly questioned First Vice President Massoud's ability to win the election. Massoud, hurt by what he saw as a betrayal by his father-in-law Prof. Burhanuddin Rabbani and other UF leaders, clung to his candidacy until other influential UF leaders urged him earlier this month to stand aside. Massoud has threatened to run as an independent candidate, but most UF members believe he will eventually return to the UF fold.

¶3. (SBU) Still, the UF remains badly fractured (reftel). Founding member Marshall Fahim Khan is now aligned with President Karzai and hoping for a prominent role in government should Karzai win re-election. Both factions of the majority-Uzbek Junbesh-e-Milli party have kept their options open; Junbesh founder Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum and current Junbesh Chairman Sayed Noorullah have both reportedly told supporters not to discount a potential alliance with Karzai. Influential Hazara leader Haji Mohammed Mohaqqueq, too, has refrained from firmly committing to the UF, even though Abdullah has reportedly offered Mohaqqueq the Second Vice President spot on his ticket.

¶4. (SBU) UF spokesman Sayed Fazel Sancharaki told PolOff the coalition has not yet settled on its vice presidential candidates. Coalition leaders Rabbani, Lower House Speaker Qanooni, and Ahamd Wali Massoud (the VP's brother) are lobbying (with little apparent success) most of the major Pashtun candidates, including former Finance Ministers Ashraf Ghani and Anwarulhaq Ahadi, to accept the First VP position on the UF's ticket. Pashtun UF member Mustapha Zahir Shah appears to be the default choice for First VP if the coalition fails to attract outside support, though Zahir too has received offers from Karzai to join his campaign. Rabbani's chief of staff and son Sallaludin Rabbani told PolOff that with the decision now behind them, coalition leaders could focus on "taking the campaign seriously and reaching out to the public."

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